10. PROPAGANDA AND HOW JOURNALISTS CAN AVOID IT (CASE STUDY)

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Objectivity has long been a core issue and major preoccupation for journalists covering war and armed conflicts. As a framework concept and formal standard, objectivity was practically nowhere to be found. Every war brought up the issue time and again, replenishing the pool of examples of objectivity being almost universally unattainable. We have stood witness to the concept gradually becoming a distant and largely pointless notion in the eyes of many experts.

At the onset of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and during the War in Donbass that ensued we saw journalists – mostly from Russia – not only abandoning objectivity but deeply delving into propaganda. The Kremlin was putting the finishing touches to a complete transformation of journalism into an instrument for information warfare. Brian Whitmore, Senior Russia Analyst for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, called it a 'war on information', pointing it out as an example of a new type of state-driven propaganda on a direct collision course with objective conflict reporting.

Previous research carried out within the framework of the *Stopfake.org* project indicates that Russian media (both government-owned and quasi-private) took part in elaborating 18 propaganda frames to be put to use in the context of the War in Donbass[1]. All were consistent with the official government talking points. Media became instrumental in spreading these pre-fabricated messages to a wide variety of audiences – domestically in Russia and in Ukraine, but also to a much broader international audience, mostly within the EU.

Christophe Deloire, Secretary General of Reporters Without Borders, commented that 'According to Putin's spokesmen, journalists who don't toe the official Russian line are trapped in a one-sided vision of the world if not fully subservient to the US empire. They argue that the Kremlin's violations of freedom of information are justified by the need to correct this 'bias' and to promote a vision inspired by the Russian people's deepest feelings'[2].

In the context of the Ukrainian crisis the key instruments of propaganda were:

- manipulating facts/mixing fact and fiction (all types of media – from TV to news agencies and blogs)[3];
- manipulating headlines;
- intentionally misinterpreting events[4];

- faking sources of information (including the use of newly-created fake websites and blogs);
- falsifying different journalist materials, such as videos, photos (e.g. using photos from other conflicts) and expert statements;
- forging official documents (originating from both the Ukrainian and foreign governments) and even faking books (by Henry Kissinger, Edward Lucas, Luke Harding);
- quoting anonymous sources (including non-existing material);
- when quoting foreign sources to enhance international legitimacy, misrepresenting their importance within the respective system of media (i.e. saying 'source: leading German newspaper' instead of marginal or low-profile blog that was actually used) or creating the impression of existing consensus in a specific country concerning an issue;
- staging complete events[5];
- faking sound bites;
- using propaganda vocabulary, often invoking Cold War rhetoric;
- creating propaganda stories to reinforce the government talking points (e.g. fake reports alleging ethnic cleansings perpetrated by the Ukrainian Army in Donbass in order to provide the Russian Mission to the UN with bogus 'facts' purportedly justifying the summoning of a meeting of the UN Security Council in order condemn Ukraine).

As *Die Zeit* writes in a recent analysis 'persistent characterisation of the regime in Kyiv as fascist; the aggressive accusation that third parties were to blame for shooting down the MH17 passenger jet over eastern Ukraine; the ongoing false claim that Lisa, an ethnic German girl from Russia living in Germany, was raped by refugees, even when it had already been established that this was not true; the discrediting of critical journalists as US-controlled agents; and, finally, the dissemination of contradictory versions of the shelling of a United Nations aid convoy in Syria – all of these obfuscation attempts follow a pattern that can be traced back to the Soviet Union'.[6]

When confronted with questions of standards and ethics, journalists using propaganda 'frames' typically reply along the lines of 'We are just doing our job' or 'We just want to keep our job – it's nothing personal', sometimes even defending the propaganda approach to 'news' fabrication.

This official approach and the journalists affiliated with it are shifting the burden of fact-checking and verification from journalists to the audience.

The so-called 'patriotic journalism' – a form of journalism that eschews the traditional standards of conventional journalism in favour of overt support for a country's chosen narrative as a tool for legitimising propaganda – is yet another challenge.

In Ukraine, the issue has sparked a major debate among journalists who have begun to question professional and ethical standards. The government in Kyiv failed (for better

or worse) to create its own propaganda narrative. Journalists who practised 'patriotic journalism' were placed under scrutiny and the legitimacy and professionalism of their actions were questioned by their peers[7].

The 'Euromaidan' and the ensuing clashes enhanced the diversity and pluralism of Ukrainian media.

Another element of the debate on journalism and war was the emergence of new actors covering conflicts – activists, bloggers, and citizens who create huge volumes of user-generated content (UGC). For example, a lot of content relating to both the War in Donbass and MH17 investigation was generated by the Bellingcat collective – not a journalistic but rather an open-source intelligence (OSINT) platform. Their findings were widely used by professional journalists. On the one hand, Bellingcat produced significant volumes of content that was previously unavailable, broadening and diversifying the scope of reporting. On the other hand, we witnessed greater competition for the attention of audiences. With high speed data transfer and abundant and easily available information, fact-checking and verification have become even more complex.

Most new content producers automatically attempt to label themselves as 'journalists', generating a lot of controversy in the process. Even if bloggers or activists do have unparalleled access to information and produce content that is genuinely unique, they cannot be automatically labelled as journalists who subscribe and adhere to the standards and ethical codes of the profession. An example of this is the controversy surrounding the Ukrainian website 'Myrotvorets' (*Peacekeeper*), which published hacked e-mails originating from the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic' and containing personal information about many Ukrainian and foreign journalists. According to Anna Nemtsova, the Moscow-based correspondent of Newsweek, 'what Myrotvorets has done in recent days is to distribute the leaked e-mails while lambasting journalists for 'cooperating with terrorists' simply on account of having received press accreditations on the enemy side of the front line'.[8]

What can be done to avoid propaganda while covering war?

Objectivity vs. transparency

Objectivity is a cornerstone of journalism. However, in recent years the principle has repeatedly come under attack. Media experts no longer consistently expect journalists to be objective and neutral on the issues they cover. Instead, they are asked to be transparent about their aims and professional methods. Geneva Overholser, former Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, wrote that 'With objectivity no longer the byword, transparency and accountability become ever more important – transparency of intent and also of procedure'.

Fact-checking/Verification

Another reason why journalists are not able to avoid the traps of propaganda in times of war is a lacking commitment to fact-checking or willingness to do it properly. Craig Silverman, one of the authors of the 'Verification Handbook', says that many news websites apply little or no basic verification to the claims they pass on. They are only linking existing media reports, which have already cited other media. A badly researched report, without proper fact-checking and verification, can be shared and reach thousands of readers in a short space of time. If the rumour is repeated often enough, it can become true on account of repetition alone.[10]

Journalists can use a wide range of instruments for information verification – both traditional and recently-developed digital apps and tools that are available on the 'Verification Handbook' website in different languages[11]. StopFake.org also has a special section (Tools) dedicated to fact-checking and verification tools[12].

Standards and values

Journalists should reflect more on their standards, values and practices, recognising the fluidity of these categories and being more adaptive to a rapidly changing environment while striving to uphold the core standards of their profession.

Improving skills

Journalists engaged in war reporting should also strive to continually upgrade both their professional and personal skills. Ukrainian journalists who *en masse* did not have previous experience of covering war and armed conflicts appeared ill-prepared for the type of journalism required. The main challenges stemmed from being poorly prepared for work in a hostile environment, lacking basic survival tactics and the use of protective gear, liaising with the military, handling sensitive information, and reporting the stories people who have experienced trauma, such as wounded individuals, relatives of people who had lost their life and internally displaced persons.

Understanding how propaganda works

In order to be able to safeguard against the many traps of propaganda, journalists need education on the mechanisms for its fabrication and dissemination and on the methods for its deployment depending on the audience as a means of raising awareness of propaganda-related problems. Better educating journalists in this area will make them less susceptible to the traps and pitfalls of propaganda.

About the author:

Yevhen Fedchenko has almost 20 years of experience with media industry; contributed comments, among others to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, BBC, NPR, Public Radio International, CBC and Radio Canada International. He is Co-founder of the fact-checking website StopFake.org which concentrates on revealing Russian media propaganda. Since 2008 head of the PhD programme in mass communication at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA). Since 2005 Director of the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism. 2003-2005 Assistant Professor at Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism and at the political science department. He studied at NaUKMA and the National Academy of Sciences in Kyiv (M.A. in political science and Ph.D. in international relations).

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